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Cultural policy in South Korea: Making a new patron state

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BOOK REVIEW

Cultural policy in South Korea: Making a new patron state, by Hye-Kyung Lee, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, 170 pp., £115 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138831353 (hbk), ISBN 9781315736617 (ebk)

Hye-Kyung Lee's *Cultural Policy in South Korea: Making a New Patron State* is the first-ever English-language book on Korean cultural policy. It provides a contextualized, historicised and accessible account of cultural policies in South Korea covering most of the twentieth century and culminating in the current era: the Korean Wave. The reference to a 'new patron state' in the book's subtitle speaks to the seminal volume *The Patron States: Government and the Arts in Europe, North America, and Japan*, edited by Milton Cummings and Richard Katz back in 1987, and refers to South Korea's distinctive cultural policy, which articulates democratic, neoliberal and globalist agendas within the statist policy framework (4).

Despite or perhaps precisely because of what Lee calls the broad 'lack of enthusiasm about the state' among cultural policy scholars, who tend to see the state as 'an unwanted and increasingly powerless bedfellow to culture' (5), the book rests on the premise that 'culture and the state are so entangled that neatly dissociating the two is not an easy task' (6) and examines the centrality of the state in South Korea's contemporary cultural policy. In fact, the author entertains three conceptualisations of 'state' or understandings of the state in relation to culture: state as a nation state (inclusive of various possible formations of nationhood); state as a potent organizer of (liberal) governance; and state as a coordinator of social action (6–14). This triad is followed by another: the three types of a state's cultural policy capacity, taken up in the analysis of the state–culture nexus. These include discursive capacity (or capacity to invent and normalise a new discourse of culture), implementation capacity (or ability to provide legal, infrastructural, financial and other arrangements so as to carry plans and decisions out) and reflexive capacity (or ability and scope to negotiate, support and coordinate different interests in the cultural sector while recognising limitations of state-driven cultural policy) (14–15).

The second organising idea of the book draws on historical institutionalism and the belief in historical, institutional and contextual embeddedness of Korean cultural policy (or any state's cultural policy, for that matter) (1, 20). Lee studies the evolution of cultural policy as bound up with political, economic and social developments in South Korea and as often co-opted by the government to disseminate state agendas and define national identity.

The case of South Korea is fascinating not only for a sweeping lack of (Anglophone) research into it. As Lee amply puts it in the introduction, South Korea 'presents an unusual case of state policy on culture that was successfully reoriented from authoritarian to democratic and has proliferated by vigorously embracing neoliberal and globalist agendas and turning them into national development projects' (1). Colonisation and decolonisation, military occupation and military government, civilisation, modernisation, Westernisation and nationalisation, democratisation, liberalisation, neoliberalisation and globalisation: you name it – South Korea has experienced this political process, project or mega-narrative within less than a hundred years, sometimes a few at a time, always in its own peculiar way. As such, a study into the evolution of Korean cultural policy enables the author to intervene critically on multiple academic debates. More so: it mandates thinking beyond the dichotomies state-market, state-civil society, national-global, so common in the analyses of Western states' cultural policies. Combined with Lee's rigorous engagement with 'local' Korean sources, this approach – and this book – provides an important contribution to de-Westernising and internationalising ideas and frameworks in cultural policy studies.

The book consists of an introduction (chapter 1) and a conclusion (chapter 7), which set out and, respectively, revisit the relationship between culture and the state (along the lines discussed above), and five substantive chapters organised chronologically and thematically. Accordingly, chapter 2 traces the emergence of 'modern' cultural policy in South Korea and its evolution during the colonial and post-colonial times, spanning five decades between 1910 and 1960. Chapter 3 looks at the institutionalisation of cultural policy under the authoritarian developmental regime in the 1960s and 1970s, broadly characterized by modernisation and nationalisation of cultural policy. Chapter 4 examines the complexities of democratic transformation of Korean cultural policy since the late 1980s and the many paradoxes of cultural policy 'after democratisation'. Finally, chapters 5 and 6 analyse the doing of cultural policy from the mid-1990s onwards, scrutinizing in turn the effects of the forces of neoliberalisation (in the context of creative cultural industries) and globalisation (in the context of the so-called Korean Wave).

On the pages of chapter 2, the reader learns about the notion of 'cultural rule' as understood by the Japanese colonisers of Korea; about cultural war and cultural Cold War in the years following 1945; about the idea of Korean national culture and its early-on reconciliation with, even embrace of world culture; about the difference between cultural protection and cultural protectionism; and about the 'persons of culture' as understood by South Korea's various (authoritarian) regimes. These all had shaped a cultural policy, with physical infrastructure for cultural provision, cultural sector's organisational structure and cultural policy practices, that long outlived colonisation and occupation (35).

In chapter 3, the reader discovers the Korean adaptation of the Western discourse of 'modernisation' under President Park as a top-down national project stripped of its democratic element, in which artistic freedom (like any other form of freedom) was to be regulated and thus 'existed mainly as rhetoric' (38). Lee articulately discusses various reincarnations of government-introduced notions of 'spiritual culture' and 'national culture', vastly if not unanimously embraced by domestic cultural and intellectual communities, as well as conflicting visions on culture's relationship to economy (notably, debated in South Korea at least two decades before the culture–economy nexus became a 'hot topic' in the West). The subsequent 'cultural renaissance' was possible, thanks to the exceptional discursive, implementation and administrative capacity of the regime and the statist co-option with the cultural sector.

The relationship between culture and democracy and the frameworks of 'democratising culture' and 'cultural democracy' in the context of Korean cultural policy from 1987 onwards are problematized in chapter 4. Lee submits that South Korea provides an interesting case in this regard, given its 'complicated trajectory of democratic transformation of cultural policy, in which the implication of democracy has gradually shifted from political to cultural' (64). The democratic shift of cultural policy has not occurred without paradoxes, however. First, cultural activism, which Lee argues was one of the main driving forces behind policy transformation through challenging the official discourse and authoritarian cultural control, lost its efficacy rather quickly: it failed to fill the discursive vacuum and eventually lost ground to pop culture consumption. Second, although "'institutional autonomy" of culture in the form of expert-led policy making' (75), coupled with gradual abolishment of censorship, has become a key theme of cultural policy discourse since democratisation, effectively this autonomy had to rely on government's commitment and capacity to support it. Third, initially 'depoliticised' in the course of democratisation, cultural policy has been 're-politicised', with South Korea's arts policy 'thrown into an unprecedented crisis' in the years preceding publication (81). The evidence of 'blacklists' of artists and censorship had been uncovered during the investigations into President Park Guen-Hye, her ministers and aids in 2017, and the scandal left the cultural ministry 'most seriously affected and fatally delegitimised' (82).

In chapter 5, the reader follows Lee in challenging the West-centric views on the becoming of South Korea's 'energetic policy' for cultural industries and contesting the conventional understanding of neoliberalisation of culture more broadly (87). Through engaging with concepts of 'entrepreneurial state', 'fictitious commodity' and 'post-culturalisation', Lee explains how South Korean

government has played (and still plays) a leading role in the formulation and increasing expansion of cultural industry policy. While the policy is indeed driven by economic considerations (in tune with the country's neoliberal transformation) and results in a commodification of culture to the extent that cultural and social significance of commercial cultural products is no longer seen to be of policy relevance, this process is not accompanied by the withdrawal of the state, as one might expect. Quite to the contrary: in the case of South Korea, the policy 'is characterised by strong leadership and capacity of the government and public agencies' in what pertains to planning, setting targets, mobilising public resources and private investments and beyond (88). Such 'embedded neoliberalisation' (90) appears paradoxical at first sight – and at first sight only, as Lee reasons: imagined and pitched as a symbol of a knowledge-based economy, with technology for a mediator, the cultural industries helped Koreans make sense of the country's overall economic transformation. In fact, 'creative economy' in its 'post-cultural' sense (encompassing an 'entire national economy as fuelled by creativity') has become a key reference in South Korea's most recent economic policy discourse (110–112).

Finally, chapter 6 unpacks the Korean Wave, or immense popularity of contemporary Korean pop culture products first regionally, in China and other Asian societies, and then globally. Transcending the mainstream debate on whether the Korean Wave is best credited to the forces of global market or to government's support for cultural businesses, Lee goes on to 'probe into the intersection and interactions between the Korean Wave and cultural policy' (119). She argues that in the current reality of a 'fusion among diplomacy, entertainment media, export promotion, tourism and fandom' (120), it is increasingly difficult to delineate the Korean Wave as a cultural phenomenon and the Korean Wave as a state project. Perhaps most importantly, the Korean Wave challenges the mainstream understanding of (cultural) globalisation as Westernisation and the weakening of nation state (and national culture) and of cultural proximity as *the* explanatory factor. Translated into Korean as 'make [Korea] like the world' (123), globalisation in the Korean case is reconciled with nationalism. Being a 'global cultural factory' does not come without issues, though, as Lee warns the reader: the intensifying convergence between the public and the private in the context of the Korean Wave may be dangerous if unaccompanied by a good degree of critical reflection (144).

Lee concludes that – despite the fundamental differences between the political regimes of the past century and in spite of democratisation, neoliberalisation and globalisation in the past three decades – 'culture is uninterruptedly perceived as "intrinsically instrumental"', while the statist and hierarchical mode of operation dominates contemporary cultural policy in South Korea (147).

Further studies shall follow Lee in questioning mainstream, Western-centric assumptions and understandings in cultural policy studies by scrutinizing the case of South Korea and other 'paradoxical' cases further and by placing them confidently in a comparative, regional and global context.

This book is rich conceptually, analytically and empirically and is written in a reader-friendly manner. It will be of great interest to scholars and students of cultural policy studies (like myself), as well as to scholars and students of globalization studies, media studies, East Asian and Korean studies – or simply to those who are curious to learn about South Korea's path from an apparent absence of cultural policy in a modern sense at the beginning of the twentieth century to the global popularity of Psy's *Gangnam Style* at present.

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